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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning in the English classroom actively involves students in learning many useful applications of writing skills for use in future careers. In the work place, for instance, collaboration takes place regularly and group skills are of major importance. Job-related writing involves many forms of collaboration from the start of a project through its completion. In the writing classroom collaboration facilitates students' problem-solving skills, diminishes the fear of participating in discussions, and leads to the written expression of more comprehensive ideas. Activities for collaborative involvement in the writing process abound, e.g., word processing skills, group work on problematic structures such as subject-verb agreement, technical definitions activities, and resume writing. No matter what group activities students become involved with, collaborative learning helps them to write better and enables them to grow socially and academically. (KEH)

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: A NO-LECTURE METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: A NO-LECTURE METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH

If instructors give up the lecture method of teaching in a classroom, students can begin to work together to improve their skills in communications.

Several years ago, while my students were working in groups during a freshman composition class, a colleague commented that he was not sure what I was doing in my classroom, but it did not resemble teaching. Actually, he was correct. The students, however, were learning. Research indicates that placing the responsibility and activity of learning on the students increases their chances for achievement. Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century, the report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges published by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, calls for collaborative learning to be strengthened, indicating that students who learn to work together are better prepared for life (25). Peer tutoring, peer editing, writing centers, and group work on revising are practices familiar to English teachers; however, the concept of collaborative learning in the English classroom can go a step further replacing the more traditional lecture method of instruction.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: WHAT IS IT?

Collaborative learning is the use of small groups in which students work together on academic material (Slavin, "The Cooperative Revolution Catches Fire" 9). It is a form of learning which emphasizes learner-centered activity as opposed to teacher-centered activity (Gere 56). Students are more task oriented while in their groups, working toward a common goal and needing each other to complete the task. Learning in this way becomes an active process for the students rather than a passive process.

Collaborative learning takes place in our personal lives as well as our work situations. We often seek advice from friends in our personal lives; at social gatherings we converse with each other about issues, and from such discussions we learn, review and often make decisions. In societal groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon, collaborative learning is indeed the basis of the entire community. In our work places, collaboration takes place regularly. Such is the purpose of business meetings, lawyers consulting with one another, doctors collaborating on a diagnosis, and certainly, as Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede point out in the their research, job related writing being collaborative from the start of a project through its completion (74). As teachers we attend conferences, share ideas with colleagues, work together on projects, work on committees, and often seek suggetions regarding our classes. We all work collaboratively.

In the classroom, collaborative learning challenges the authority of the teacher who is often reluctant to give up such a position (Bruffee 42). If two of the goals in the English classroom are to foster critical thinking skills and personal growth, they cannot be done by lecture. Students must have opportunities to practice these skills. The goals must be reached by making the student the active participant and the teacher the more passive manager of the activity (Lindsey 11).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The advantages of collaborative learning, according to the literature and my own experience, far outweigh any of the disadvantages. Students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills are enhanced as well as their ability to work with others, skills needed to function successfully in any area (Parker 48-57). Cooperative groups produce more comprehensive ideas; as with sports' teams, individuals in the groups work toward a common goal (Slavin, "The Cooperative Revolution Catches Fire" 10).

In the classroom I have also found that the fear of volunteering is diminished because responses are not individual but based on group discussion. The threat of error is reduced or transferred to the group and is far less intimidating to the individual students; thus, the students' self-esteem not only

remains intact but is enhanced. Most students enjoy working together; a sense of cooperation grows; interethnic collaboration helps to build bridges; and often, students who are passive can be drawn into the group process (Slavin, "The Cooperative Revolution Catches Fire" 9-13).

Still another advantage is that the instructor is released from the full responsibility of lecturing on everything. There is far more time for the teacher to interact with the students, to become acquainted with them on a more personal basis, and to be a part of the process of learning as a facilitator for the classroom setting rather than the provider of content and controller of all activity. Overall, then, the atmosphere in the classroom is more relaxed, and students feel they can learn from one another and still have access to the expertise of the faculty member.

Positive outgrowths of such classroom activity are study groups and support systems outside the classroom which help form permanent relationships.

Disadvantages are few, at least for the teacher who is able to give up power in the classroom. If a faculty member believes that it is his or her responsible to "put" knowledge into the minds of the student, collaborative learning will not be successful. The argument that collaborative activities used exclusively for an

entire semester are nonworkable holds true only if one does not take the time to create specific directions for all requirements of the course.

One drawback to the collaborative learning process is the necessity for the students to have group skills which allow for successful group work. English professors will find it difficult to incorporate group skills into an already full schedule; however, monitoring group activities to determine which social skills need increased attention can be accomplished by the professor working with each group (Smith 664). The instructor must be able to set up tasks and work with each group to help the group identify a recorder, a spokesperson, and often an individual who will set the tone for the group work. If done early in the quarter or semester, the social skills needed for group work begin to flourish.

In a recent article in College English, "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning," John Trimbur indicates that critics of Slavin believe the individual may be lost to the consensus of the group (602). Still, in defense of the process, the group seems to give the student, often unsure of herself or himself, a sense of belonging and encouragement. When students work on text book exercises, they exhibit much more confidence in sharing their answers with the entire class knowing they have worked with others.

GROUND RULES

Slavin believes that unless collaborative learning groups have a goal and an evaluation of that goal, the effort may not be effective in increasing student achievement, though it certainly will have social implications ("Cooperative Learning: Student Achievement" 33). The collaborative learning techniques I use require group goals but not necessarily grades at the completion of each goal. Students still manifest all the qualities and advantages of group learning even without some form of evaluation of every group task. The results of the group's work become evident in the atmosphere of the classroom, the written assignments, and exams for the entire quarter.

Some teachers oversee their classes for several days before helping students choose the groups to which they will belong for the duration of the quarter or semester. The purpose is to assure heterogeneous grouping. I, however, do not usually help students determine their groups. Since collaborative work begins the first or second class period, cliques have not formed yet and the students seem to get into groups with individiuals they do not know.

The teacher has a major responsibility in this type of classroom. He or she needs to be clear on goals for the group and carefully structure the exercise or project. The teacher then needs to communicate those goals clearly and needs to monitor the groups

to judge what skills need to be strengthened as the students work. The teacher will no longer be standing in front of the classroom listing information, but instead, through careful structure and planning, working with the students to help them achieve the objectives set forth in the syllabus of a course.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

1. COMPUTER ACTIVITY

Students in my freshman composition classes are required to learn word processing as part of the course. A simple instruction sheet for a word processing program is part of the students' classroom material. Students go as teams to work together in the computer lab or the writing lab. The writing lab has peer tutors, another collaborative learning effort, where teams can receive help from individuals already using the program.

The important outgrowth of this activity is the peer revising and editing that begins to take place when students work together in the lab.

2. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ACTIVITY

Students can be asked to read certain pages in their text dealing with the use of indefinite pronouns and to do individual exercises. In class, groups work on the exercises, sharing answers and developing a list of rules which govern their answers. When individuals in the group cannot come to agreement, answer books are available, as well as help from the instructor who is moving from group to group. The culmination of the activity occurs when groups present the rules they have developed to the rest of the class.

3. TECHNICAL DEFINITIONS ACTIVITY

In Technical Writing, students read the section in the text on technical definitions. During class time, groups play the game of "dictionary" where one individual finds a word and tells the rest of the group the word. Each individual in the group writes his or her own definition. One individual writes the correct definition. They share all the answers, trying to choose the correct one. They analyze each of the statements, the made-up definitions as well as the correct one, and compare the parts to the three parts of a technical definition. They then read models of technical definitions which have been included in their classroom handouts. The students then write an extended definition to be incorporated into a process manual.

4. DEVELOPING RESUME ACTIVITY

An example of a resume which has many factual, grammatical, and organizational errors is given to students. In groups, they identify the problem areas. In another related activity, students use information about an individual and in the groups they write a resume for the fictitious person. They exchange "final drafts" of the resumes with other groups for criticism and comment. Then students create their own resume.

I use collaborative learning activities every day in every class I teach. I find it workable and the students agree. I have shared only a few of those exercises in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative learning provides the students and teacher with an exciting experience. The students have been actively involved and have learned many useful applications of writing skills for use in their careers. The students in my classes indicate that English is enjoyable. As a faculty member, I enjoy working with students, getting to know each of them on an individual basis, and watching them grow socially and academically.

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